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SUBJECT: ARREST OF PAKISTANI MALAFIDE PASSENGERS LAYS BARE WEAKNESS IN RIA SECURITY

¶11. (SBU) Summary: The removal of two malafide Pakistanis from a Brussels Airlines August 12 flight to Brussels by airline officials, and the GOL's subsequent investigation, has brought to light a well developed smuggling operation using the Roberts International Airport (RIA) VIP Lounge as a way to avoid normal security screening checks. The ring was recycling stolen U.S. passports to purchase the tickets. Members of the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN), the MFA Office of Protocol, an expeditor for Firestone Rubber Plantation, and one member of Brussels Airlines' local security company ESM are under investigation. President Sirleaf has tasked Minister of Justice Christiana Tah to follow the investigation. Also implicated is a local travel agency owned by Randolph Cooper, a former RIA managing director who is on the UN Travel Ban and Assets Freeze lists. Five Pakistanis are now in custody, as well as several Liberians. The VIP Lounge has often been seen as a weak link in RIA's security (including by Brussels Airlines), and it must be eliminated or its use must be severely curtailed in order to avoid a repeat. Ambassador has prohibited Mission personnel or USG TDY personnel from using the VIP Lounge without the prior consent of the DCM. If Brussels Airlines cannot be assured of quick improvements to airport security, it will consider suspending flights. A TSA-ASSIST team is in town to help improve security at the airport. End Summary.

Smuggling Ring Operation

¶12. (SBU) The arrest of five Pakistani nationals and several Liberians has uncovered a ring to smuggle Pakistani and perhaps other nationals through RIA to Europe by means of Brussels Airlines that has been in operation for at least several months. Investigation resulting from the removal of the two Pakistani nationals indicates collusion between a local travel agency, immigration officials, employees of the VIP Lounge and at least one employee from a local security service. It is not clear at this time whether the same procedures were used to board the malafide passengers on previous flights.

¶13. (SBU) According to Brussels Airlines Country Manager Luc Metdepenningen, since January 1, 13 undocumented passengers have entered Brussels from flights originating from Monrovia or transiting Monrovia from Abidjan. In investigating the pattern, he noticed the repeated occurrence the names of two AMCITS on the flight manifests during every occasion when Belgian immigration authorities detained the undocumented aliens. According to electronic ticket records, though the two were purchasing round-trip tickets, the return legs were never used and no baggage was ever checked in under their names. He provided Consul the electronic picture files of the passports of the two individuals:

-- Samuel SCHROCK; DPOB: 25 FEB 1985, Washington (state); US PPT (Regular) #160275997; DPOI: 31 MAR 2000, Washington, DC.
-- Jason Donald KADLEC; DPOB: 19 FEB 1975, Nebraska; US PPT (Regular) #112498570; DPOI: 22 FEB 2001, New York City.

¶ 4. (SBU) On July 6, Metdepenningen asked for Consul's assistance in determining the validity of these U.S. passports as well as any other information that would contribute to mitigating the fraudulent use of U.S. travel documents through RIA. Consul informed RSO of the request.

¶ 5. (SBU) PIERS and CLASS records checks revealed that USPPT 160275997 had, in fact, been issued to Sarah (not Samuel) Schrock, DPOB: 21 NOV 1975, Washington (state). PIERS records show that this PPT was subsequently reported stolen by Sarah Schrock on August 14, 2002 in Nairobi, Kenya. She was a Peace Corps Volunteer at the time so the passport was valid for only five years. The passport therefore appears to be both photosubbed and biodata altered. A comparison of the PIERS record to the provided scan indicate that USPPT 112498570 has not been altered. This passport, however, was reported lost by the bearer in NYC in 2003.

Travel Agency, Other Involvement

¶ 6. (SBU) In a subsequent conversation with ARSO, the Brussels Airlines Country Manager said that all tickets associated with this activity had been purchased no more than 24 hours in advance of departure (some on the day of the flight) through Liberia Travel Services (LTS). LTS is owned by Randolph Cooper, who was Managing Director of RIA under ex-President Charles Taylor and is currently on the UN Travel Ban and Assets Freeze lists for being "instrumental in the various violations of the arms embargo." Cooper is also the general sales associate for Virgin Nigeria Airlines in Liberia as well as the head of the Liberia Travel Agent Association.

¶ 7. (SBU) The Country Manager and ARSO agreed that the most likely mechanism by which this fraud was being committed indicated the complicity of some, if not all, layers of the security screening process at RIA, as the passports bear the pictures of Caucasian males who are unlikely to resemble the South Asian individuals purporting to be the rightful bearers of these passports. They also agreed that the investigation and research should remain confidential between Brussels Airlines and USG until such time as Liberian authorities could be briefed without presenting the possibility of an internal leak at RIA.

¶ 8. (SBU) During a trip to Brussels in July, the Country Manager was asked by Brussels Airlines security to discuss the case with Director General of the Liberian Civil Aviation Authority (LCAA) Richelieu Williams to develop a protocol for the return of the malafide passengers to Liberia. Belgian authorities had attempted to return one of the aliens to Liberia on July 15, but this individual was refused by Liberian immigration officers at RIA and returned on the same flight to Brussels.

¶ 9. (SBU) Metdepenningen met with Williams on August 8 and apprised Williams that U.S. passports were likely being used to facilitate the trafficking operation and that Brussels Airlines had been in communication with the U.S. Embassy. Williams told Metdepenningen that he wanted to "deploy a big operation" at the airport to set an example about security at RIA. Later that day, Williams departed Liberia for Ghana, returning on 12 AUG 2009.

Two Pakistanis Arrested

¶ 10. (SBU) On August 11, Metdepenningen observed that LTS had booked a seat on the August 12 Monrovia-Brussels flight in Kadlec's name. He waited until the next day (day of the flight) to verify that the passenger was travelling (to be sure the ticket was actually purchased, not just the reservation made). The ticket was purchased midday on August 12.

¶ 11. (SBU) After confirming that a passenger posing as Kadlec had checked in, the Country Manager placed himself in the aircraft cockpit as the passengers were boarding. He observed two vehicles moving from the VIP lounge to planeside, where the passports were checked by a local Liberian employee of Brussels Airlines' locally-contracted security handler ESM. Two males appearing to be South Asian exited one of the vehicles at the aircraft and proceeded to board. When all boarding was complete, Metdepenningen requested that the cabin crew check the travel documents of the two South

Asian passengers. When he was satisfied that the two individuals were not bearing proper documents, they were detained and Metdepenningen notified Williams. The second individual was seated under a reservation for Dennis Derrick MOORE; DPOB: 26 FEB 1951, Texas; US PPT #133985070, which. The passport was reported stolen in Indonesia in October 2002. According to Brussels Airlines records, this was the only use of this passport in the past few months.

¶12. (SBU) Metdepenningen could not confirm to us that the two passengers had the passports in question in their possession, but said that the two could provide no travel documents or identification. Liberian Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization (BIN) has been unable and/or unwilling to provide the Embassy with location and status of any travel documents seized in this investigation.

¶13. (SBU) According to BIN Commissioner Chris Massaquoi, the two individuals arrested at RIA were Pakistani nationals:

Zahwer Abbas, DOB: 20 JUL 1987
Address: Sherupura, Jica Tajvel Munaka Tharanarrang, Pakistan
Father's Name: Abbas Ali Gursya
Mother's Name: Saifa Bibi

Ali Hasnain, DOB: 06 AUG 1990
POB: Sialkot, Pakistan
Father's Name: Mukhtar Ahmed Anjum
Mother's Name: Maqsoda Bibi
Address: No. 03 Sambrial Sialkot

BIN Commissioner Massaquoi told Emboffs that as of August 24 BIN has five Pakistanis in custody.

Arrests Make the Press

¶14. (SBU) Post was made aware of the August 12 arrests only on August 18 through an article in the local Heritage newspaper that claimed that a "sting operation" had been conducted by the LCAA, giving Williams full credit for busting the ring. Metdepenningen has told Emboffs that the article was completely inaccurate, and that Williams learned of the events only after the two were removed from the plane by airline officials. The article did, however, give the names and numbers of the U.S. passports. Metdepenningen said he had tried to contact Consul (who has since departed post) and ARSO (who is on TDY) but did not attempt to contact anyone else. Even though U.S. passports were used in the scam, GOL officials did not contact the Embassy.

¶15. (SBU) During a meeting with the Minister of Justice on August 21, Charge raised the arrest issue, noting that publicizing the arrests before the investigation was complete may have made finding the rest of the perpetrators more difficult, and expressed concern that the U.S. passports used in by the ring still have not been recovered. Later that day, charge called on President Sirleaf. The Minister of Justice, BIN Commissioner and LCAA Managing director were also present. President Sirleaf admitted that the press release was ill-advised. Massaquoi and Williams then provided the President their version of events, and Sirleaf instructed the Minister of Justice to determine the facts of the case.

Next Steps

¶16. (SBU) The Embassy will continue to monitor the situation. Charge briefed the incoming TSA-ASSIST team on the events. Ambassador has prohibited all Mission personnel from use of the VIP Lounge without prior approval by the DCM. Metdepenningen said that Brussels Airlines will send a high level team to Monrovia (arriving August 24) to assess the situation. Embassy is organizing a meeting with TSA-ASSIST, the Brussels Airlines officials and UNMIL for August 26.

¶17. (SBU) Comment: Post believes this smuggling operation may have had high level support within the airport, as prior efforts by Brussels Airlines to tighten security resulted in little change. It is conceivable that Williams' actions were motivated by a desire to

demonstrate government resolve. However, the unintended consequence was to make the activity public before the investigation could be completed. RIA and Lockheed Martin, which has recently won a six-month contract to manage RIA (septel), must now find ways to eliminate this and other weaknesses in the airport's security. It is clear that the GOL now understands that flights to the U.S. will not occur until the security situation improves, and President Sirleaf's personal interest in the matter and her entrusting the case to her Minister of Justice, whom she trusts, is positive. The arrival of the TSA-ASSIST team, the takeover of RIA management by Lockheed Martin, and Brussels Airlines' desire to beef up security allow for a window of opportunity for real improvement to the airport, that the GOL must seize.

ROBINSON